

Dornoch Academy **double anniversary**



Heading back to Dornoch and the 'Swinging Sixties'

HAMISH MACKAY, who was a pupil at Dornoch Academy from 1959 to 1964, and now lives in Aberdeen, aged 66, reports from an historic double anniversary celebration in the Royal burgh

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I AM sure that one of my favourite songsters, Paul Simon, will not be too miffed if I abridge the lyric of one of his most memorable songs to describe Dornoch's biggest-ever educational bash as the "mother of all reunions".

It was all happening at Dornoch Academy on a crisp September Friday – the 50th anniversary of the Queen Mother opening the current school building in 1963, and the 100th anniversary of educational facilities first being built on the site.

And happily for me, the former pupils who returned for the big day were predominantly from my era – the "Swinging Sixties".

The portents were all favourable for what turned out to be one of the most memorable and emotional days of my life.

A painless rail trip from Aberdeen to Inverness; coffee and croissants (and too many cigarettes) at a fresco in a sun-drenched Inverness; and ravishing scenery on the bus trip to Dornoch on a beautiful becalmed autumn morning – so still that as we crossed the Cromarty Firth the opposite landscape and skyline were perfectly mirrored in the water.

I thought fondly of my erstwhile English teacher, Florence Strachan, to whom I owe so much for being able to earn a living in the business of words. It was Florrie, as she was called, who immersed us in the likes of John Keats and his poem "To Autumn", and that marvellously evocative line: "Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness".

Unusually apprehensive, even uncharacteristically nervous about the day ahead, I was mightily relieved to see some familiar faces as I approached my former seat of learning.

The ice was broken but it was still somewhat tentatively that I deposited my suitcase, laptop and mandatory carrier bag stuffed with assorted goodies in the foyer and made myself known.

I was immediately welcomed and swiftly brought under the "mothering" influence of

clerical officer Heather Fraser and youth development officer Yvonne Ross, whom, I discovered when the official ceremony got under way, is the Provost of the Royal Burgh of Dornoch.

So, I knew that I, and my assorted goods and chattels, were in safe hands until I

collected them in the early hours of the following day.

I had no sooner sat down for the official anniversaries ceremony when a lady in front of me inquired as to whom I was. Apparently satisfied with my answer, she whispered her sister's name to me, and slipped me her sibling's phone number.

This was Allison, the love of my life for one (or was it two years) in these halcyon times which seemed perpetually the lazy, crazy days of summer, and now married and a grandmother living in England. A year older than me – I was then a gauche, if cocky, but naïve member of the Earls Cross Hostel pack from the north and west coasts – Allison, my first real love, was alluring, chic, elegant and beautiful.

I can still pungently remember the fragrance of her perfume.

However, I suspect I was really out of my depth and my class.

I wonder will I ever pluck up the courage to telephone her – imagine the two sexagenarians chatting civilly but with long, pregnant pauses. Much water has passed under the bridge since we danced with the leaves of the trees or discovered the delights of Royal Dornoch Golf Club's course.

Meanwhile, the ceremony proceeded apace and my new and bestest friend Yvonne introduced Dr Monica Main, the Lord Lieutenant of Sutherland, to re-enact the role of the Queen Mother back then in 1963.

I immediately warmed to Yvonne's swashbuckling

style as she explained:

"Fifty years ago, the Rev William MacLeod stood here as provost and made a



Discovering the delights of Royal Dornoch Golf Club course...

lengthy speech on education and its foundations in Dornoch. Luckily for you, I'll not be following in his footsteps – my speech will be like me, sweet, and unlike me – short!

"Many of my family, including my granny, mother, aunts, uncles, husband (only one of them), myself and my three daughters have been educated here. Well, I think we turned out okay, but I'll leave it to you to decide."

Main for her re-enactment spot, she confided: "So now it is 1963. I can almost hear the Beatles playing! Please don't say I look like Black Will! (Black Will was the nickname for the formidable Rev William MacLeod.)"

The Queen Mother, whom I was to meet periodically in my career in journalism, declared in 1963: "No county has done more than Sutherland in recent years to improve the educational facilities available to its young people. This is the third secondary school to have been completed in the last year or two, and I understand that a fourth is under construction at Bettyhill."

Later she pointed out: "It is all the more remarkable to consider Sutherland's excellent record, when one remembers that, economically, it is not a rich county, and it is faced with peculiar difficulties, in the shape of a population which is sparse and widely scattered. I feel that it is the challenge of these difficulties which has contributed to this fine achievement."

Thus the afternoon official ceremony ended, and I meandered alone, deeply lost in thought and bombarded with long-forgotten images and faces, around the ancient Royal burgh. I nipped into the Eagle for a splendid repast and prepared for the evening session – the marquee ceilidh dance in the school grounds.

Again Miss Strachan reached out to me from the past – urging me to quote John Milton's Lycidas: "At last he rose, and twitched his mantle blue; Tomorrow to fresh woods, and pastures new." Inevitably, she invoked the right words at the right time. God bless her soul.

My eyes had frequently moistened ever since I had arrived at my former school. The tears were to flow freely before midnight struck.

■ Next week Hamish will report on the fun-filled marquee grand ceilidh dance – taking a further trip down memory lane and resolutely facing up to his past.

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The Queen Mother, 1963